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Stories from River Bend Church

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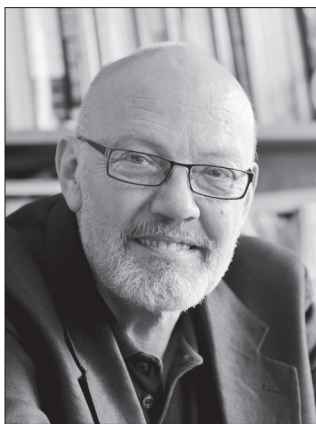
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The Stories from River Bend Church



by Jim Schaap

The sign out front says that it's "The Oldest Continuously Used Church in the State of South Dakota" begun "October 3, 1869 with 47 members." What that sign doesn't mention is that all of those charter members were Santee Sioux. The River Bend Presbyterian Church is not all that far from here—north to Pipestone, then west (and a bit north) to Flandreau, just across the highway from the Flandreau Indian School.

Microsoft Word doesn't recognize the word *Flandreau*, so the schoolmarm spell-checker red-pencils it. But then she red-pencils *Pipestone*, too—doesn't recognize either of those words, even though Pipestone is home to one of the most sacred places in Native cultural history. Microsoft tells me that neither *Flandreau* nor *Pipestone* exists.

Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English Emeritus at Dordt College.

Well, they do. Trust me. I was just there. I took that picture.

Quaint. Cute. Well-kept. Neatly painted. A sweet and darling old church—if you're into old country churches. The warm blue skies would make a post card maybe, although a souvenir store just outside would go under soon enough because no one visits River Bend. Only locals ever see this church, and its age-old familiarity probably makes it invisible to locals too. If you're going out west on vacation, River Bend Church is almost terminally out of the way. But Lord knows there's a story.



In 1862, Minnesota's Dakota people were starving. They'd been promised provisions after giving up half the state for a thin strap of river valley along the Minnesota. The buffalo were largely gone, and white folks were rolling in behind teams of horses or oxen, marking off land as if no one lived there.

The Dakota War of 1862 began when the Dakota people wouldn't take it anymore. The Minnesota River ran red with the blood of white settlers who were killed, butchered, by Dakota war-

riors the white folks sometimes knew personally. It was a terrible moment in our history—bloody, horrifying, and tragic. Very sad.

Even their leader, Little Crow, told the insurgent Dakotas that fighting the white man was going to get them killed, and it did. Hundreds of Dakota were arrested and brought to trials that sometimes lasted no longer than five minutes. Then, 303 of them were sentenced to hang, and marched to Mankato. The same week that President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, he determined that only 38 of the 303 should die. The rest were left in chains while the largest mass-hanging in American history happened when 38 Dakotas were lynched on December 26, 1862.

But another amazing event happened right there in late December too, an event that few want to talk about because few really know what to make of it. Before they were hanged, those 38 men were baptized into the Christian faith—all of them. Just about every white man and woman in Minnesota thought it profanation for missionaries to impart the love of Jesus to the bloody, murderous heathen who'd killed upwards of 400 white settlers—and they said so, as did the newspapers. But the missionaries persisted, and nearly all of the 300 warriors originally sentenced to death also became Christians right there in Mankato. To use evangelical language, all of them “found the Lord.”

The Reverend Stephen R. Riggs, who had at that time been a missionary to the Dakota people for thirty years, remembered it this way:

Some of these men, in their younger days, had heard Mr. Ponds [another missionary pastor] talk of the white man's religion. They were desirous now, in their trouble, to hear from their old friends, whose counsel they had so long rejected. To this request, Mr. G. H. Pond responded, and spent some days in the prison assisting Dr. Williamson. Rev. Mr. Hicks, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Mankato, was also taken into their

Something incredible had clearly occurred in the lives and hearts of Dakota warriors, some of whom had not that long before murdered their neighbors—the men, women, and children of the Minnesota River valley.

counsels and gave them aid. For several weeks previous, many men had been wishing to be baptized and thus recognized as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. This number increased from day to day, until about three hundred—just how many could not afterward be ascertained—stood up and were baptized into the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. The circumstances were peculiar; the whole movement was marvelous; it was like a “nation born in a day.” The brethren desired to be divinely guided; and after many years of testing have elapsed, we all say that was a genuine work of God's Holy Spirit.

I don't know what to make of that story of mass conversion. I can think of all kinds of reasons to doubt it—fear of death for one, sheer hopelessness for another. Nothing clears the mind, someone once said, like a date with the hang-

man. Maybe so, maybe not. Some claim those Dakota warriors had witnessed the Native way of life fail miserably; they were ready for something else, anything.

The mass hanging *and* this wildly unbelievable mass conversion are only two parts of an incredible story. Hundreds of other Dakota prisoners up the river at Ft. Snelling were baptized also, hundreds of men and women who weren't hanged but were sentenced instead to suffer horrors that went on for years. All of that is right beneath the surface here, right here at River Bend Church.

The forty-some souls who began River Bend in 1868 were among those who could remember all of that if they chose to—the bloody rebellion, the hangings, the imprisonment, and then even more starvation and disease and malnutrition, awful drought, the endless moving—down the Mississippi, up the Missouri, the march to Nebraska, the pilgrimage to Flandreau. It's all here at “the oldest continuously used church in South Dakota.” Believe me, it's here.

If you walk through the church cemetery, you'll find graves of people who knew that whole story first hand, a man like Moses Day, who died 16

years after the Dakota War—November 27, 1873. Beneath his name and the date of his death is an inscription in the Dakota language, words I can't read. I wish I could.

It's not hard to miss River Bend Church. Most of America does. You can skip over the stories. In their own congregational history, the church claims that those who remembered all that horror and sadness determined never to tell their children. Moses Day likely never brought it up.

You can discount those hundreds of baptisms too, if you'd like. You can write it all up as hysteria, a mass movement as flimsy as the tenets of the Ghost Dance. You can shake your head at what Rev. Riggs said was a "nation born in a day." You can wince when he calls what happened in Mankato "a genuine work of God's Holy Spirit."

I do.

But there's an old country church just outside of Flandreau, South Dakota, a town that is just a bit west of Pipestone, Minnesota, two places my software doesn't want to believe exist. Those towns are very real, just as this church is. It is there, a testimony. Most of those founders discovered the Lord in the depth of their tribulation.

Not long ago, I read a meditation by Lauren Winner that included the gospel account of the woman at the well, a woman Winner says was a bit stupefied after her encounter with Jesus, not quite sure what had happened ("Could this be the messiah?" the woman asks, then leaves her water jug behind).

Winner asks herself a question I'd rather not answer. "Is it too simple," she writes, "to suggest that she encountered God's forgiveness—and that an encounter with God's forgiveness does indeed inspire urgent feelings?" And then, bravely, she enters that woman's mind: *I just experienced something amazing. I have to tell someone. I'm not even totally sure what the experience was, I just know it was—everything.*

Is it too simple to believe that the baptism of 300 Dakota warriors slated to die was not some mad mass delusion? Why do I find what happened so hard to believe—that God would come to a prison full of heathen killers? That he brought his grace to warriors chained to the floor? That he listened to frantic Dakota prayers? Why is it easier for me to

believe that God almighty wasn't paying attention when the men with a date with the hangman were baptized? Is their redemption so hard to believe? And if for me it is, then why is that so?

Just six days after the Mankato hangings, the St. Paul *Press* editorialized this way:

As long as an Indian lives in our State, it will be to all the rest of the world a "Haunted house," through whose empty corridors the hoot of owls will echo the shrieking spectre of midnight murder, and men will pass by for other lands, and women will hug their babes closer to their breasts when they hear the ill-omened name of Minnesota. The Indians must be removed, every one of them.

The government banished its First Nations population. More than 1600 old men, women, and children were swept off their native land after the 1862 outbreak and imprisoned in what some call a concentration camp at Ft. Snelling, a dark place haunted by death. It was cold and it was wet, and the Dakota people were under-clothed and under-nourished, living in spaces so tight that disease went on a rampage. In those four months, more than 130 more Dakota perished.

Gabriel Renville, a "mixed-blood" Dakota who would become a leader of his people, remembered the Ft. Snelling imprisonment this way: "Amid all this sickness and these great tribulations, it seemed doubtful at night whether a person would be alive in the morning."

Amazingly, when the Ft. Snelling prisoners heard of the mass conversions of the warriors at Mankato—their husbands, fathers, and sons—hundreds more asked to be baptized. Hundreds. For those dark winter months, fervent spirituality reigned among the captive Santee warriors at the makeshift Mankato prison, as well as their families in the detention camp at Ft. Snelling. The Christian faith grew in the darkness of all that suffering and all that death.

When finally the ice disappeared from the Mississippi, all of them—the Mankato prisoners first, then the Ft. Snelling families—were packed on steamboats. They had no idea where they were going.

The men were taken to Davenport, Iowa, where Ft. McClellan, then teeming with Civil

War recruits, created a stockade to hold them. Federal companies were assigned to guard them. Missionaries who'd been with the Dakota since their peaceful days along the Minnesota River stayed there at Ft. McClellan, conducting worship services and teaching the warriors to read and write and sing hymns in their language.

One of those missionaries, Rev. Steven P. Riggs, claimed that a new company assigned to this duty, at first treated the prisoners with a good deal of severity and harshness. But a few weeks sufficed to change their feelings, and they were led to pity and then respect those whom they had regarded as worse than wild beasts.

Something incredible had clearly occurred in the lives and hearts of Dakota warriors, some of whom had not that long before murdered their neighbors—the men, women, and children of the Minnesota River valley.

Meanwhile, a thousand Dakota old men and women and children were packed onto steamboats at Ft. Snelling and brought down the Mississippi, too. Forever banished from the new state of Minnesota, they had no idea where they were going.

All of that is part of the history of River Bend Church, that little church on a hill just outside of Flandreau, “The Oldest Continuously Used Church in South Dakota.” Visit the little church sometime—perhaps, during Lent. You could do worse. We all could.

But there's more.

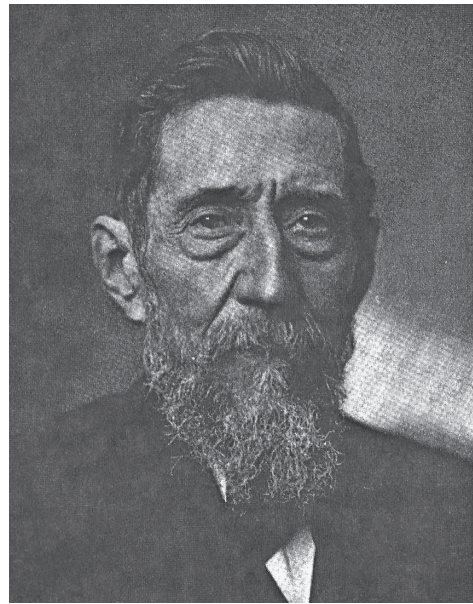
In early July of 1863, the United States of America had very little time for the Dakota people who'd created a bloody war in a faraway place called Minnesota. In Pennsylvania, Gen. Robert E. Lee took on Union forces at Gettysburg. A nation not yet a century old lost as many as 51,000 American soldiers, killed or wounded or missing.

The only white folks who cared about a couple thousand indigenous people who'd been removed from their native land were Christian missionaries, one of whom—Rev. John Williamson—was literally, not figuratively, embedded with the weary prisoners at Ft. McClellan, Iowa. His was a true ministry of presence. “He did not forsake them but stayed by them in evil and in good report with the devotion of a lover,” wrote Rev. Stephen Riggs in

his memoir of those years.

And the times were difficult. On July 4, 1863, the state of Minnesota declared Dakota scalps worth \$25 each. By September, the price tag had been raised to \$200.

Approximately 1300 Dakota women and children—and a few old men—were marched on to two steamships from their makeshift prison at Ft. Snelling and carried down the Mississippi, stop-



ping every other day for firewood. One of those steamers stopped at Hannibal, Missouri. That Sunday, Williamson conducted worship in the freight depot, twice. All those wild Indians in town drew a crowd that swarmed around them throughout their stay, but when it came time for worship, Williamson told his mother in a letter, “I shut most of the whites out.”

The next day several hundred from the first steamship were packed into railroad cars—freight cars, not passenger cars—sixty per wagon, and taken to St. Joseph, where they waited on the Missouri River for yet another steamboat to take them where? No one knew. In a letter he wrote that morning, May 13, 1863, Williamson admits he has no idea how all of those Dakota will fit on a single steamboat. “I don’t know where they will stow them, even if they give them the whole boat,” he wrote. “But then folks say they are only Indians.”

The destination was Crow Creek, Dakota

Territory, an arid place on harsh and naked land impossibly unlike the green Minnesota woods where they'd lived. What they'd gone through since the war was nothing but malnutrition amid a steady diet of hunger, imprisonment and deprivation, disease and death.

Colonel Thompson, the Indian agent at Crow Creek, faced a dilemma. He had thousands of Indians to feed—Minnesota had banished a thousand of its Winnebago to Crow Creek too, even though they'd played no part in the war. What's more, Thompson had meager provisions. So with fresh-cut cottonwood boards he built a huge barrel, filled it with water, mixed in the flour ration and a small piece of pork, then warmed it all with a steam engine that huffed and puffed all night long.

When the whistle blew in the morning, all those Native "prisoners of war" were told to bring their pails to get the only sustenance they were served all day—a ladle of gruel that tasted more like cottonwood than anything else, "cottonwood soup."

When, years later, those who established River Bend Church got together and talked about their lives, Williamson claims the words "Crow Creek" caused them "to hush their voices at the mention of the name." Three hundred more Dakota women and children died of disease and starvation at Crow Creek. "So the hills were soon covered with graves," says Williamson.

Meanwhile, at Ft. McClellan, 120 of the 300 men died in the next three years. In 1864, a few men were released to join their families at Crow Creek. Once a peace commission visited the Dakota Territory in 1865, the government recommended that all the Dakota survivors—the men at Ft. McClellan and the women and children at Crow Creek—be moved to yet another location in Knox County, Nebraska.

A few months later, the Ft. McClellan prisoners boarded a steamship bound for St. Louis, then went up the Missouri to Nebraska. The women and children from Crow Creek walked.

Now if you're thinking that, out there in Nebraska, they were still a long ways from Flandreau, South Dakota, and what is today River Bend Church, you're right. None of the history of the forty-some people who built the church is written on the freshly painted walls nor inscribed on

the fancy sign out front or even scribbled on the worn old stones leaning this way and that in the cemetery. The whole story is just too big, too long, and too harsh for people to want to remember.

Their own account of their history claims that all the stories I'm telling weren't repeated often within the walls of River Bend Church. "Because the pain was so deep, generations to come would be unaware of the suffering they endured," that history claims. "Those who survived chose not to speak of it to their children and grandchildren."

Still, that old church is not far from here. Not far at all. I think I could do worse, not knowing.

But the graves are here, and in a way that's maybe particularly Native. I think the graves will speak if you listen.

Here you'll find Little Crow. When he was a kid, his father was killed when a rifle somehow discharged. A bloody fight for leadership ensued between him and his brother, and Little Crow was wounded in both wrists, scarring his arms so badly he kept them covered for his entire life. But he became the leader of the band of Dakota into which he was born.

Some would say he caved in 1851, when he signed the treaty at Traverse des Sioux, thereby consigning his people to a thin strip of reservation land along the Minnesota River. He took to wearing white men's clothes, joined a church, and started to farm. He visited Washington, a trip that shook the temerity out of dozens of Native warriors. Pictures of Little Crow show him to be just another white pioneer.

But he wasn't. He was a leader of his Dakota people. When obligations weren't fulfilled and his people were starving, he chose war, even though he was against it. When he did, he went all in, as leaders do.

He is the only man buried in the cemetery at the River Bend church, Flandreau, South Dakota, who has a war named after him, Little Crow's War. Today, people call what happened 150 years ago "the Dakota War of 1862," but "Little Crow's War" is also a fitting description, even though he knew himself it wouldn't end well.

To avoid what was to come, he and others fled to Canada when the fighting ceased; as a result, he was not among those thirty-some hanged at

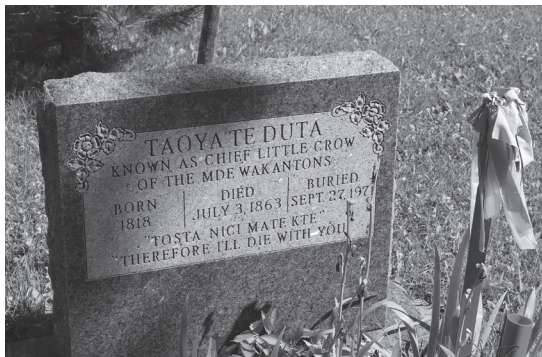
Mankato in December of 1862, the largest mass hanging in American history. But soon he returned home and was killed in gun fight when two white settlers stumbled on him and his son.

For a time, no one knew who lay there dead in the grass. No matter. He was, after all, an Indian, so his body was dragged up and down the streets, fire crackers set off in his eyes and ears before his head was cut off. Those who killed him got \$75 for his scalp; one was cited by the legislature for honorable service.

Eventually, his scarred wrists identified him as Little Crow, chief of the Dakota, whose warriors had killed almost 500 settlers—men, women, and children, slaughtered them.

Years later, his remains were given to a grandson. Right there in the cemetery at River Bend Presbyterian Church, his remains are today, one hopes, at rest.

The inscription on his stone is part of the reason he's still regarded, by some, as a hero. In August of 1862, Little Crow knew what was going to happen once Dakota warriors raided the agency that wouldn't give them food that belonged to them. He knew a fight would not end well, but he led his warriors anyway. "Therefore I'll die with you": You can read that line on his stone—bottom line.



Little Crow's story is staggering. He led a rebellion that slaughtered what a white man like me can't help thinking of as innocent people—immigrant homesteaders, whole families, some of whom actually knew him. Some attended the same church.

But Little Crow was to some—to many—a great hero. Still is. You don't have to believe that to be true, but if you can't believe it, you really should try to understand anyway.

River Bend Church is not so far from here, but you must hunt to find it. I don't know of a tour bus that would take you there. You're very much on your own.

A story like Little Crow's, in this fair Siouxland of ours, is never all that far away, no matter where you are. I find that thought humbling, whether or not I'm walking in a cemetery.

There are several preachers here; one of them, Rev. John Flute, given his name, should have been musical. I don't know if he was, but his name is multi-cultural. His father, or so says his stone, a marvelous slab of Sioux Quartzite, was Flute Player, described here as a "chief." What little I could find about his father establishes that he was an early signer of treaties, maybe the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux. Chief Flute Player probably didn't name his son "John"—that name likely came later, perhaps when John became a Christian.

That 1851 treaty created the Dakota Reservation, the twenty-mile-wide strip along the river that became, thereby, the special reserve for the Dakota people. If I'm right about the chief's having signed that treaty, it was signed the same year Reverend Flute, the chief's son, was born.

The inscribed wooden cross at the head of the grave is relatively new, as is what looks to be a votive candle-holder beneath it. The beautiful stone is new too, lovingly hand-decorated and bolted to what appears yet another slab of Sioux Quartzite.

Reverend Flute died in January of 1933 ("D.O.D. 01-03-1933"), but what's perfectly clear by way of the sweet tribute of this renewed grave site is that someone is making perfectly sure great-grandpa is not forgotten. Warms the heart.

In 1909, a comprehensive article in the *Assembly Herald*, the official magazine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, describes that denomination's Native American mission efforts across the length and breadth of this country and includes a roster of preachers and evangelists in the church's many, many mission outposts. "Christian Indians in the Making," it's titled, and the roster it includes describes this very pastor, John Flute:

The church at Mayasan is under the care of the Rev. John Flute. He has a large family of children whose mother is totally blind. The devotion of the girls to their afflicted mother is very touching. Mrs.

Flute is a lovely character and the home is a fountain of hospitality.

It couldn't be the children who keep up the gravesite, of course; it has to be grandchildren these days. But the writer's glowing admiration of Mrs. Flute's attentive children must be a trait that hasn't disappeared through the generations.

There's more:

John Flute is nearly a white man in appearance. His features are fine, and his smooth, silvery hair gives him the effect of some old-time German musician. Especially in prayer he seemed to lead the hearts of the people. When he speaks, the steady, wise counsel of the matured pastor is manifest. He is deeply beloved as a preacher and a brother.

And great-grandfather, we might add.

There may well be more to the story, but that dear description sounds just right at this beneficent gravesite. Someone really cares. That's very clear.



Rev. Flute may well have been baptized as an infant in 1851. Converts to the Christian faith existed within the reservation on the Minnesota River, but there weren't many, despite almost three decades of mission work by dedicated people. The oldest Santees remembered in the cemetery at River Bend Church in Flandreau, South Dakota, are almost certainly among those hundreds who, as if en masse, converted to Christianity when their uprising failed. Even at the time, some who saw what happened claimed that those hundreds and hundreds of Santees came to Jesus because it seemed to them that their own gods had failed them in a war that ended almost as quickly as it had begun.

Rev. John Flute was a missionary among his

very own Native people in Sisseton, South Dakota, at a time when Native missions were flourishing and churches were being born and led by indigenous preachers like himself. Look over those passages about him. There is rapture in the writing style. The author describes an outreach that's as sturdy and strong, as beautiful—as red and as Native—as the stone a loving family proudly placed over the grave of a man whose memory is too precious to be forgotten.

The sign out front of the old church up on a hill north of Flandreau is "The Oldest Continuously Used Church in South Dakota" (all caps because it is, for sure, a title worth coveting). That means it has been "First Presbyterian" for 137 years but "River Bend Church" when it was established along the Big Sioux River long, long ago. The name change came later.

But a church is no more or less than the people of its family, including the old ones out back in the cemetery. Several dozen stones stand, sometimes a little crooked, all of them worth reading, when you can.

One, well-weathered, lies in the grass. It's still readable in spots, some of its old lines anyway. It may take you a minute or two, but if you look close, you'll see it's a child, a boy I think, although the name is not easy to read. The dates are clear enough, however—he was three years old, and his last name was Weston, and he died long ago, in 1894.

If you look closer, beneath the Weston boy's dates, the inscription carved into the stone is a line of gospel one might expect on almost any child's grave: "Jesus said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me, . . . for of such is the kingdom of heaven.'"

You can still read most of that, 120 years later.

But beneath that line from the book of Luke, in letters I couldn't have read even if they'd been crisp and clear as an October morning, is another wording of the same verse, this one a bit larger font, written out in the Dakota language. I'm guessing, of course—I can't read the words.

Not long ago, I stood right there on a Saturday morning in dewy summer grass and told myself that some stories are readable in every language, because here lies a child, dead for more than one hundred years, a Santee three-year-old from some home

along the Big Sioux River just outside of Flandreau, SD. It looks to me as if his grieving parents were believers, maybe bilingual, but still Santee enough to want to read the comfort of Jesus's words in the warmth of their first language, which is always, for everyone, the blessed language of intimacy.

When, after some time, the death of a child can be spoken of, the story of grief itself can be told in any language because a beloved child who is no longer among us becomes a pained absence realized in every last community around the world.

I stood there in the wet grass of a country churchyard as if no time had passed, stood there that morning as if around me were gathered all the goodly saints of Riverview Presbyterian Church, a whole crowd of witnesses of every race and creed.

There isn't much more to say than what's inscribed there in the weathered stone and lichen. That grave is lying in the grass of the cemetery of an old church up on a slow hill outside a small town in eastern South Dakota, marking the gravesite of a little boy who died when he was three years old, a story on a stone tipped over by age and relentless

Great Plains seasons.

No matter what the language, when you stand over a stone like the one remembering the Weston boy, you can't help but feel that once upon a time, we've all stood there, don't you think?

Years ago, the novelist Frederick Manfred told me where his interest in regional history began. His father and the boys had just finished milking, he said, so he sat down on the cement steps outside their farmhouse near Doon, Iowa, and looked out on the broad land before him, miles of it. He said he couldn't help asking himself what stories were there in and on that land, stories he knew nothing of. There had to be more than he knew, he told himself.

That's where the stories began.

Sometime soon, sit on the step and wonder for yourself. River Bend Church isn't all that far from here, just a ways north. Worth the trip. Oldest Continuously Used Church in South Dakota. Read the sign for yourself someday.

It isn't that far from home.



Little Crow